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This paper advances a humanistic and literary view of history which has important implications for those doing educational evaluation in naturalistic settings. It stresses the particularity of historical events and the importance of investigating history from the perspective of the individual actors involved. It emphasizes being sensitive to history's complexity and understanding historical events from as many different viewpoints as possible. It furthermore espouses the view that history is essentially a story that is told in ordinary, everyday language. And that it should endeavor to convey the richness of human experience, while jarring the reader into new understandings of his contemporary perspective of the world. (Author)

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THE ROLE OF HISTORICAL EXPLANATION IN PROGRAM EVALUATION

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This paper advances a humanistic and literary view of history which has important implications for those doing educational evaluation in naturalistic settings. It stresses the particularity of historical events and the importance of investigating history from the perspective of the individual actors involved. It emphasizes being sensitive to history's complexity and understanding historical events from as many different viewpoints as possible. It furthermore espouses the view that history is essentially a story that is told in ordinary, everyday language. And that it should endeavor to convey the richness of human experience, while jarring the reader into new understandings of his contemporary perspective of the world.

By calling this section of our symposium "The Role of Historical Explanation in Program Evaluation" I am already committed to a particular view of history. By that I mean this title assumes that historical explanation is at least in some ways distinct from explanation in the natural sciences. Fortunately I am prepared to defend this position; however, there is a venerable tradition in the philosophy of history, going back at least as far as the European Enlightenment, which asserts that laws of universal validity unify all knowledge and are thus as applicable to history as to science. Modern versions of this view argue that the causes of an event can be deduced from laws or generalizations derived from the sciences and that history, at least potentially, has the same predictive value as the natural sciences. The alternative view that historical explanation is unique will be discussed in this paper.[1]

Now I am not an evaluator. My background is in history and education. My intention today is to describe the implicit and explicit assumptions of many practicing historians and how they actually do history. I am going to allow you to draw your own conclusions about the usefulness of this approach to history for program evaluation. I have, at the very least, two allies in this endeavor, both of whom are esteemed evaluators. One is Professor Lee Cronbach, who in a recent book declared that evaluation is history. While I am not entirely clear why Professor Cronbach equates evaluation and history, I am pleased to be able to cite his implicit endorsement of history as a model for evaluators. The second is Professor Ernest House, who, in his book Evaluating With Validity,

demonstrates why a historical perspective is essential for the naturalistic inquirer. I want to quote a passage from this book because it is so closely in line with my own discussion of historical explanation:

> Since the focus is on understanding various interactions, the naturalist must follow events over time. He searches for explanations, rather than predictions; and explanations must usually be grounded in the retrospective reasons people give for their and others' behavior. This necessitates considerable submersion in the participants' culture and language. Joint actions are major points of attention, and they have to be seen in some historical perspective.

Professor House's emphasis on explanations rather than predictions, explanations grounded in reasons, and submersion in the participants' culture and language are all notions I will elaborate on throughout this paper.[2]

Two and a half centuries ago Giambattista Vico argued that because men can only know what they make and because men make their own history, history, unlike the natural sciences (which is the study of things made by God), is one of those rare disciplines which allows man true knowledge. It is not easily acquired though, he said, for knowledge of remote times and places can only be achieved by thorough study of a people's language, literature, and customs. Language is crucial because through it, with its special grammatical and metaphorical structures and complex lexicon of connotational meanings, the historical figure expresses his particular view of the world. Similarly, literature, art, and customs are important indicators of a culture's values and interests. This intimacy with the thoughts and actions of another people and the unique ability of human beings to understand sympathetically permits the historian through an

enormously difficult act of imagination to reexperience and thus come to know the history of another era.[3]

As arduous a process as this sounds and as hard as Vico claimed it was, this view of historical understanding has had wide appeal for historians, especially those who depend on a tightly woven narrative to convey their explanations. Because Vico's perspective eschews any connection to science and universal laws and demands intuition, empathy and imagination of the historian, history is closely aligned with literature and is placed squarely within the tradition of the humanities.

Vico's historical view also implies a special distinction between things and human beings which suggests that the methods of science, appropriate for understanding things, are entirely inappropriate for understanding human actions. Benedetto Croce, an admirer of Vico, has further argued that human events are unique and unrepeatable and so enormously rich that they could not possibly be brought under general laws.[4] While it is the goal of scientists to discover laws and generate universal principles, the historian seeks to bring all his knowledge and experience to bear on the particular event. Perhaps more than scholars in almost any other discipline, historians value a full and penetrating description and explanation of the specific and idiosyncratic. When done well it affords a rare view into the dynamics of human thought and action, and in rather broad and unsystematic ways helps us to gain insight into the human condition. Certainly it can be argued that the more particular events are studied, the more uniqueness will be uncovered, but similarly, the more loose, recurring patterns will be encountered. This is only to suggest that in the

process of pursuing and scrutinizing the unique and unrepeatable historians cannot escape making some generalizations as well. In fact, words commonly used by historians such as revolution and social movement imply at least some generalizing tendencies among individual events.[5]

The concept of 'verstehen' or empathetic understanding was immortalized by the nineteenth century German historicists who believed very much as Vico had that the historian must immerse himself in the culture and thoughts of the historical actors being studied to get 'a handle' on what really happened. Perhaps most importantly they promoted the notion that the historian must determine how the figure in history actually conceived of his own situation. What did he think, what goals or purposes did he have and what means did he have to achieve them. As one recent thinker has put it, historical understanding comes when the hsitorian can see the reasonableness of the actions taken by historical figures. Rather than depending on causes which seem to imply necessary and sufficient conditions, reasons suggest instead not that an effect had to occur, but that it was reasonable given the historical circumstances. As I have said, this kind of understanding only comes with an intimate knowledge of the culture, the people, and the specific situations they faced.[6]

This approach does not assume that all human actions are the result of rational or even reflective action. In fact, because of its sensitivity to specific cultural circumstances and everyday experience, this approach is more likely to take account of actions carried out habitually or of behavior partially conditioned by countervailing groups or forces. If historical immersion is realized, the historian should be able to

approximate the thought processes of people in a time or culture different from his own.

While applicable to significant figures and momentous decisions, this view of history is probably most useful in the realm of social history where the historian attempts to describe and understand the "total experience" of ordinary people.

Recently, I have helped a professor of history at the University of Illinois put the finishing touches on his manuscript about antebellum and postbellum life in Edgefield County, South Carolina. Unlike earlier works, this study focuses on both the black and white communities, and traces over time how the interactions between these two groups altered their respective views of society and each other.

For instance, although some planters used religion as a tool for socially controlling slaves, religion also served some slaves as a buffer against oppression, and in some cases during the postbellum period actually helped blacks to sever ties of dependency with paternalistic whites. Thus black efforts to control towns politically, to build schools, and to establish economic independence during Reconstruction were often initiated by churches and religious leaders. This insight into the dynamics of one South Carolina community emerged out of profound and thorough study of letters, personal papers, census reports and hundreds of other documents which slowly permitted one historian to reexperience life in a South Carolina community a century removed from our time.

As has already been stated, history is often seen as a form of literature. Tolstoy believed this and actually said he planned to write

War and Peace because of his dissatisfaction with historical writing. He sought to write a book about the Napoleonic Wars portraying men authentically by describing their "thoughts, knowledge, poetry, music, love, friendship, hates and passions." One of the great virtues of War and Peace is that Tolstoy was able to depict the events of that time from a multiplicity of perspectives. An approach which increases the complexity of the portrait provided and perhaps taxes our ability to comprehend and take in the entire picture, but which surely enhances the verisimilitude of the era portrayed.[7]

A historical novel of the stature of Tolstoy or Stendahl or Dickens, in spite of the obvious and often intentional factual errors, reflects the spirit of the view of history I have been describing, because the masterful imaginative writer is particularly well equipped to submerge himself in the culture of another era to reexperience its history through the writing process. The historical novel is not history, after all. It does not meet rigorous tests of accuracy, but it does express the intuitive side of historical reconstruction.

You may have gotten the impression that I think historians should have nothing to do with science and scientific methods. This is far from the truth. Historians must ask hard questions, formulate hypotheses and submit them to rigorous tests. They must not sacrifice standards of accuracy and meticulous documentation for the sake of an interesting or imaginative narrative. Moreover, they can and often do use sophisticated statistical methods to test hypotheses about such things as household structure, wealth differentials, and social mobility. Although many traditional

scholars are worried about the encroachment of statistics and the computer on the domain of the narrative historian, I do not see why these are incompatible. The best historians make an effort to synthesize the 'inside' view of history drawn from imaginative submersion in the total culture of the era being studied with 'outside' judgments stemming from discoveries made retrospectively of which the historical actor could not possibly have been aware. These underlying influences that affect human action of which we are rarely conscious must be taken into account in explaining or interpreting historical events.[8]

However, when scientific methods or an undue emphasis on the 'outside' view of events leads the historian to advance an interpretation which doesn't seem to accord with the richness and variety of human experience, I tend to reject such accounts as trivial, practically insignificant, and quite frankly, false.

Like the finest literature, the best history should communicate the shock of recognition which comes from an account revealing a pattern of closely fitting events that enriches our understanding of ourselves and our relation to the world. Because history at its best is the result of not only precise, deliberate scholarship, but of an empathetic act of imagination, those human qualities which allowed the historian to immerse himself in the events of another era should inform his work and similarly allow the reader to become a part of the events described and emerge from the experience a changed and more perceptive person.

Unlike the natural and social sciences, history is written in ordinary, everyday, jargonless language. This language is an integral part of

meaningful history, for in order to understand and express the thoughts of the ordinary and the famous alike their everyday means of communication must be the vehicle. To resort to some sociological lexicon in explaining their actions is to deprive the reader of the opportunity to understand history. Traditional historians have thus lamented the tendency of younger historians using social science techniques to taint their narratives and analyses with the jargon of science. While falling prey to the seductiveness of scientific language is not inevitable, the historian using social science methods must be careful to resist this temptation.

To sum up, historical accounts must reflect the complexity and richness of human events. The historian must be not only factually accurate and precise, but sensitive to the special conditions of particular times and places by becoming intimately familiar with a people's thought and culture. Moreover, he must understand the specific circumstances that confronted a people at a particular point in history in order to see what they knew and didn't know, and how these facts enhanced or limited their opportunity to act. While history's complexity is increased when the historian offers a view of the past from many different perspectives, the likelihood of providing a fuller, more satisfactory explanation of what happened is also increased. Finally, although it is not always possible, the historian who presents his explanations in a narrative form using ordinary language is more likely to jar the reader into new realizations, which may in some small way alter his view of the world.

NOTES

[1] The best example of this view is developed by Carl Hempel, "The Function of General Laws in History," Theories of History, ed. Patrick Gardiner (New York: The Free Press, 1959) pp.344-356.

[2] Lee Cronbach, Towards Reform of Program Evaluation (Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1980); Ernest House, Evaluating with Validity, (Beverly Hills: SAGE Publishers, 1980) p.280.

[3] Giambattista Vico, The New Science
For helpful discussions of Vico's philosophy of history see:
Isaiah Berlin, The Divorce Between the Sciences and the Humanities, The Second Tykociner Memorial Lecture, University of Illinois, 1974, pp.27-44; Isaiah Berlin, Vico and Herder.

[4] Benedetto Croce, "History and Chronicle," The Philosophy of History in Our Time, ed., Hans Meyerhoff, (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1959) pp.44-57.

[5] The idea that history is the study of the particular has been advanced by many thinkers. Among them are Croce, Wilhelm, Dilthey, Pattern and Meaning in History, and R.G. Collingwood, The Idea of History. Good discussions of this issue may be found in: Patrick Gardiner, The Nature of Historical Explanation, (New York: Oxford U. Press, 1952); William Dray, Philosophy of History (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1964).

[6] R.G. Collingwood, The Idea of History, (London: Oxford U. Press, 1946) p.283; William Dray, "Explanations of Actions Reconsidered," Ideas of History, Vol. II, ed., Ronald H. Nash, (New York: E.P. Dutton and Co., 1969, pp.106-124.

[7] Isaiah Berlin, The Hedgehog and the Fox, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1966) p.20.

[8] The conception that history has an 'inside' and an 'outside' has been most notably advanced by Collingwood in The Idea of History, p.213. It has also been ably used by Isaiah Berlin in "The Concept of Scientific History," Philosophical Analysis and History, ed., William Dray, (New York: Harper and Row, 1966) pp.5-53. Also see Page Smith, The Historian and History for his slightly different notions of "history mindedness and present mindedness." p.230.

[9] On these points and many others Isaiah Berlin in "The Concept of Scientific History" has been very helpful.